



Kazakhstan

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the various religious communities worship largely without government interference. Local officials attempt on occasion to limit the practice of religion by some nontraditional groups; however, higher-level officials or courts occasionally intervene to correct such attempts.

There was no change in the legal status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, but the Government's enforcement of previously amended laws led to increased problems for some unregistered groups. The law on religion continues to impose mandatory registration requirements on missionaries and religious organizations. Most religious groups, including minority and nontraditional denominations, reported that the religion laws did not materially affect religious activities. Unregistered religious groups experienced an increase in the level of fines imposed for nonregistration in addition to stronger efforts to collect such fines. Most registered groups experienced no problems, but the Hare Krishna movement, a registered group, suffered the demolition of 25 homes as part of the Karasai local government's campaign to seize title to its land based on alleged violations of property laws.

The population maintained its long tradition of secularism and tolerance. In particular, Muslim, Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Jewish leaders reported high levels of acceptance in society. During the reporting period, the dominant Islamic and Russian Orthodox leaders publicly criticized a number of nontraditional religious groups. The number of registered religious groups and places of worship increased during the year for virtually all religious groups, including minority and nontraditional groups.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The Ambassador and other U.S. officials supported the country's efforts to increase links and mutual understanding among religious groups. U.S. officials engaged in private and public dialogue at all levels to urge that proposed amendments to the religion laws are consistent with the country's constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and with the country's tradition of religious tolerance. U.S. Government officials visited religious facilities, met with religious leaders, and worked with government officials to address specific cases of concern. During the reporting period, the Embassy sponsored exchange programs for leaders of various religious groups to meet with a diverse range of counterparts in the United States. Embassy officials maintained an ongoing dialogue with a broad range of groups within the religious community.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 1,052,540 square miles, and a population of 15.4 million, according to government statistics released in February 2007. The society is ethnically diverse, and many religious groups are represented. Due in part to the country's nomadic and Soviet past, many residents describe themselves as nonbelievers. Several researchers reported and surveys suggested low levels of religious conviction and worship attendance. The Government maintains statistics on the number of registered congregations and organizations but does not keep statistics on the size of each group. The most recent reliable statistics on religious affiliation came from the 1999 census. Although there was a large increase in the number of minority religious congregations registered since 1999, the Government believes that percentages of the population belonging to particular religious groups have remained consistent.

Ethnic Kazakhs, who constitute just over half of the population, and ethnic Uzbeks, Uighurs, and Tatars, who collectively comprise less than 10 percent, are historically Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school. Other Islamic groups that account for less than 1 percent of the population, include Shafi'i Sunni (traditionally associated with Chechens), Shi'a, Sufi, and Ahmadi. The highest concentration of self-identified practicing Muslims is located in the southern region bordering Uzbekistan.

Sizeable populations of ethnic Russians and smaller populations of ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Belarusians, are Russian Orthodox by tradition; together they constitute approximately one-third of the population. There were 268 registered

Russian Orthodox churches. An estimated 1.5 percent of the population is ethnic German, many of whom are Roman Catholic or Lutheran.

Members of a Roman Catholic archdiocese include many ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Germans and account for 2 percent of the population. The Government reported 82 registered Roman Catholic churches and affiliated organizations throughout the country, and 166 foreign Roman Catholic clergy and missionaries. A smaller, affiliated community of Greek Catholics, many of whom are ethnic Ukrainians, had three registered churches and seven foreign priests and missionaries.

According to government statistics, Protestant Christian congregations outnumber Russian Orthodox or Roman Catholic congregations, although it is unlikely that Protestant Christians account for a larger number of adherents. The Government reported 953 registered "nontraditional" Protestant Christian churches and 145 affiliated foreign missionaries during the reporting period.

There are two Baptist groups in the country, the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians and Baptists ("Council of Churches") and the Union of Evangelical Christians and Baptists ("Union of Baptists"). Although there were no precise statistics available on the Council of Churches, religious observers estimated up to 1,000 adherents, while Union of Baptists adherents number more than 10,000. The Government reported 232 registered Union of Baptists groups during the reporting period.

Other Christian religious groups with a sizable number of congregations include Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Pentecostals, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists. Smaller communities of Methodists, Mennonites, and Mormons are also registered.

A Jewish community, estimated at well below 1 percent of the population, has synagogues in Almaty, Astana, Ust-Kamenogorsk, and Pavlodar. Rabbis in Almaty reported an increase in attendance for both services and religious education during the reporting period.

Government statistics indicated 44 registered nontraditional religious groups during the reporting period, including affiliates of the Hare Krishna movement, the Baha'is, Christian Scientists, and the Unification Church. The Government also reported four registered Buddhist groups throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and religious groups worshiped largely without government interference; however, local and regional officials attempted, on occasion, to limit or control the practice of religion by several groups, especially nontraditional religious communities. The Constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides the right to decline religious affiliation. The Government continued to express publicly its support for religious tolerance and diversity.

The Government's religion laws narrow the legal protections of religious freedom found in the Constitution. The laws were amended in 2005 to reinforce registration requirements and clarify that religious groups must register with both the central Government and the local governments of individual regions (oblasts) in which they have congregations. Prior to these amendments, the Government required religious organizations to register only if they wished to be accorded legal status in order to buy or rent property, hire employees, or engage in other legal transactions. Although the amended national religion laws explicitly require religious organizations to register with the Government, it continues to provide that all persons are free to practice their religion "alone or together with others." To register, a religious organization must have at least ten members and submit an application to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ).

The Government may deny registration based upon an insufficient number of adherents or inconsistencies between the provisions of a religious organization's charter and the law. In addition, under the Law on Public Associations, a registered organization, including a religious group, may have all activities suspended by court order for a period of three to six months for defiance of the Constitution or laws or for systematic pursuit of activities that contradict the charter and bylaws of the organization as registered. Police, procurators, and citizens may petition a court to suspend the activities of a registered organization for failure to rectify violations or for repeated violations of the law. During a suspension, the organization concerned is prohibited from speaking with the media on behalf of the organization; holding meetings, gatherings, or services; and undertaking financial transactions other than meeting ongoing contractual obligations such as paying salaries.

In practice, most religious communities choose to register with the Government and are ultimately successful in obtaining

registration. Nontraditional religious groups sometimes reported long delays in the process. When refusing or significantly delaying registration, the Government usually claimed that religious groups' charters did not meet the requirements of the law, in some cases citing discrepancies between Russian and Kazakh language versions of a group's charter or referring a charter for expert examination. Officials in Northern Kazakhstan and Atyrau Oblasts were cited by several groups as being resistant to working with nontraditional groups seeking registration.

Administrative Code Article 375 allows authorities to suspend the activities and fine the leaders of unregistered groups; Article 374-1, a related provision added to the Administrative Code by the July 2005 national security amendments, carries significantly heavier fines than Article 375. Local authorities have broad discretion in determining whether to file charges for unregistered religious activity under Article 375 or 374-1. Local governments unevenly applied these laws during the reporting period.

The Religious Issues Committee (RIC), which operates within the MOJ, serves as a liaison between religious groups and the Government. In addition, the RIC serves as a consultative body within the MOJ to facilitate the registration of religious groups. The RIC also provides expert testimony to courts on religious issues, reviews religious materials obtained by law enforcement officials in their investigations, and coordinates with law enforcement officials to monitor compliance with the registration requirements.

As in previous years, government officials frequently expressed concern regarding the potential spread of political and religious extremism in the country. The Committee for National Security (KNB) has characterized the fight against "religious extremism" as a top priority of the internal intelligence service. An extremism law that came into effect in February 2005 applies to religious groups and other organizations. Under this law, the Government has broad latitude in identifying and designating a group as an extremist organization, banning a designated group's activities, and criminalizing membership in a banned organization. By the end of the reporting period, the Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) political movement remained the only group banned under the law. No apolitical religious organizations in the country had been outlawed as extremist.

The elections law prohibits political parties based upon ethnic, gender, or religious affiliation.

The Spiritual Association of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK), a national organization with close ties to the Government, is headed by the chief Mufti in Almaty and exercises significant influence over the practice of Islam in the country, including the construction of mosques. The SAMK is the primary coordinator of hajj travel and authorizes travel agencies to provide hajj travel services to citizens. Religious observers reported that the SAMK occasionally pressured nonaligned imams and congregations to join the SAMK to ensure liturgical orthodoxy. Notwithstanding SAMK influence and pressure, during the reporting period, the Government registered some mosques and Muslim communities unaffiliated with the SAMK.

Neither law nor regulation prohibits foreign missionary activity. Foreign missionaries, like all visitors, are required to register with the migration police and indicate the purpose of their stay. Local and foreign missionaries are also required to register annually with the MOJ and provide information on religious affiliation, territory of missionary work, and time period for conducting that work. All literature and other materials to be used to support missionary work must be provided with the registration application; use of materials not vetted during the registration process is illegal. In addition a missionary must produce registration documents from the sponsoring religious organization and power of attorney from the sponsoring organization to be allowed to work on its behalf. The MOJ may refuse registration to missionaries whose work would be inconsistent with the law, including laws prohibiting the incitement of interethnic or interreligious hatred. The Constitution requires foreign religious associations to conduct their activities, including appointing the heads of religious associations, "in coordination with appropriate state institutions." Foreigners are permitted under the law to register religious organizations; however, the Government requires that the majority of the ten founders of the organization be local citizens.

The Government does not permit religious instruction in public schools. Homeschooling is permitted only for children at the preschool level, for noncitizen children, for children who want an accelerated curriculum, and for children who cannot attend public schools for family or health reasons. Homeschooled children must take intermediate and public exams at a public school. Parents may enroll children in supplemental religious education classes provided by registered religious organizations.

Under the national religion law, religious training of a child shall not cause damage to a child's all-around development or physical or moral health. The laws do not clarify how such damage should be assessed or which agency would make such a determination. Current educational licensing regulations do not permit religious groups to educate children without approval from the Ministry of Education. In accordance with the regulations, a religious organization whose charter includes provisions for religious education may be denied registration if it does not obtain approval from the Ministry of Education.

The Government exempted registered religious organizations from taxes on both church collections and income from

certain religious activities. However, congregations are required to pay for services such as fire company protection for religious buildings. The Government has donated buildings, land, and provided other assistance for the construction of new mosques, synagogues, and Russian Orthodox churches.

Procurators have the right to inspect annually all organizations registered with state bodies; there were few reports that these inspections, when they occurred, were overly intrusive or were considered harassment. Where religious groups operated as legal entities, such as by running collective farms and restaurants or operating orphanages, authorities conducted health, sanitation, and other inspections relevant to the nature of the entities' operations. Authorities conducted public safety inspections of premises used for religious worship to ensure compliance with building and fire codes. These inspections also provided authorities with information about the registration status of the groups being inspected.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

No apolitical religious groups are banned in Kazakhstan.

The Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) Islamist political movement remained banned under the extremism law. Because HT is primarily a political organization, albeit one motivated by religious ideology, and because it does not condemn terrorist acts by other groups, authorities' actions to restrict HT and prosecute its members are not a restriction on religious freedom per se.

The national Jehovah's Witnesses Religious Center reported that it had generally positive relations with the Government and the freedom to conduct their activities. However, the group experienced some registration difficulties and alleged several incidents of harassment by local governments. Although local Jehovah's Witnesses organizations are registered at the national level, in Astana and Almaty, and in 13 (of 14) oblasts, the center has attempted unsuccessfully since 2001 to register in Atyrau Oblast. The Atyrau regional procurator's office maintained that the group has consistently failed to comply with registration laws. The group submitted its most recent application on March 6, 2007. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, the MOJ suspended the registration process on March 16, and forwarded the documents to Astana for expert examination, as in previous applications. On May 6, Atyrau police and procurators disrupted a gathering of Jehovah's Witnesses, videotaped participants and seized worship materials. The procurator filed an administrative case against six Jehovah's Witnesses for conducting religious activities without registration. On June 4, the local court imposed fines on the participants. The Jehovah's Witnesses appealed the decision, but on June 25 the oblast level court rejected the appeal without explanation.

The Government remains wary of religious extremism and actively discourages affiliation with extremist groups. However, human rights observers and members of some minority religious groups criticized the Government's often broad definition of extremism and its efforts to discourage affiliation with nontraditional groups. On October 10, 2006, the President signed a decree establishing a State Program on Patriotic Education of Citizens of Kazakhstan. Among other things, the decree warned against "the increasing activation of nontraditional religious associations and extremist organizations in Kazakhstan aimed first and foremost at attraction of young people." The decree cited the Hare Krishnas and Jehovah's Witnesses as examples of nontraditional groups and Hizb ut-Tahrir as an example of an extremist organization.

On September 15, 2006, the deputy chief commander of the KNB Counter-Terrorism Center stated in a press interview that the KNB was drafting legislative proposals to address so-called destructive sects and organizations. He named the Grace Church, Scientologists, and Jehovah's Witnesses as organizations that should be banned.

Also during the reporting period, the MOJ distributed a brochure designed to help citizens "avoid the influence" of religious sects. The Russian language section of the brochure warned against proselytizers and Bible studies and provided tips to avoid the influence of nontraditional religious groups. The Kazakh language section broadly criticized "foreign religious confessions" and declared that a Kazakh who becomes involved with a religious sect "betray[s] his/her faith and motherland." The Kazakh text specifically warned against Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, Ahmadis, and Hizb ut-Tahrir. The Jehovah's Witnesses objected to the brochure after learning that public school teachers in the Pavlodar region distributed it to their students in October 2006. The RIC reported that the brochure was produced by another section of the MOJ without the RIC's authorization, and was no longer in production. The brochure was reportedly distributed through public legal advice centers, but the RIC was unable to confirm how many brochures were printed or where they were distributed.

In March 2007 Jehovah's Witness centers throughout the country rented local halls and rooms for an April 2, 2007, religious ceremony, and distributed fliers inviting citizens to the event. However, in several cities including Kyzylorda, Shaktinsk, Shymkent, and Taraz, the landlords called the Jehovah's Witnesses shortly before the event and canceled the reservation. The Jehovah's Witnesses alleged that the landlords were pressured by local government officials. In Semipalatinsk, the Jehovah's Witnesses and their guests arrived on April 2 to find their rented space surrounded by firefighters. A local government representative claimed that they needed a permit for the ceremony and denied them admission to their rented room. In each case, the Jehovah's Witnesses were able to hold their ceremony in other locations.

No other religious groups reported similar instances of government interference in their public gatherings.

There were reports that local representatives of the KNB or police officials disrupted religious meetings in private homes during the period covered by this report. Several groups reported that local law enforcement representatives attended their services, although their presence generally was not considered disruptive.

The Baptist Council of Churches has a policy of not seeking or accepting registration in former Soviet countries, and church members criticized the intrusive nature of the registration process for requiring information about ethnicity, family status, religious education, employment, and political affiliation. During the reporting period the Council of Churches noted several court cases against churchgoers throughout the country for participating in the activities of an unregistered group.

The Karasai regional government near Almaty continued a campaign to seize title to land used by the Hare Krishna movement. Following the Supreme Court's August 24, 2006, denial of the Hare Krishna's appeal, the RIC formed a special commission to resolve the issue and promised that no further action would be taken against the commune until the commission completed its work. Some participants described the commission as disorganized and subjective; Hare Krishna leaders alleged it was created merely to deflect criticism of the Government on the eve of the Congress of World and Traditional Religions, which took place in the country in September 2006.

On November 21, 2006, with little notice to residents, Karasai district officials arrived at the commune with court orders, bulldozers, trucks, and riot police. Authorities blocked access to the commune, cut electricity, and demolished multiple homes, destroying possessions and leaving homeowners without shelter or compensation. The police beat several Hare Krishnas and arrested at least one resident who protested the action. The police attempted to bar observers from the process. The demolitions occurred without the knowledge of the RIC and before the special commission released its results.

On December 22, 2006, the commission released its decision, which did not effectively clarify the situation or move the parties toward a resolution. In public statements following the decision Government officials stated that the Hare Krishnas were in violation of various land-use laws and were not victims of religious discrimination.

Karasai district officials continued their legal actions against the Hare Krishna properties throughout the winter and spring of 2007. Government officials in Astana, including the RIC and the human rights ombudsman, pledged to resolve the situation through dialogue, including a possible agreement to provide the Hare Krishnas with an alternate property. Nonetheless, on June 15, 2007, Karasai district officials again brought a demolition crew to the commune and destroyed an additional 12 homes, destroying many possessions and leaving the residents homeless. At the end of the reporting period, the situation remained tense and unresolved, and the Hare Krishnas continued to allege judicial violations by local officials and unresponsiveness on the part of the Government.

Although many observers believed the Karasai district government's actions were motivated primarily by a financial interest in the land, the Hare Krishnas claimed the local government targeted them because they are a nontraditional religious community. Local officials criticized the Hare Krishnas as an illegitimate and threatening religious group. In an April 25, 2006, television interview, a local official from the Karasai akimat stated that the Hare Krishnas were dangerous for the country and "not accepted as a religion."

In addition only homes owned by Hare Krishnas were targeted for demolition, though the Hare Krishnas claimed that other homeowners faced similar legal circumstances. The Government characterized the issue as a legal dispute, noting a series of court rulings that the land should revert to the Karasai regional government, because the farmer from whom Hare Krishna followers had purchased the land in 1999 did not hold title, and thus the land had not been properly privatized.

Observers believe that security officials informally monitor some religious activity, particularly imams' sermons; however, it has not been reported that any monitoring had the character of interference or harassment.

Although in the previous reporting period the Ahmadi Muslim community reported difficulties in obtaining visas and registration for a foreign missionary and his family, the community reported no problems during the reporting period, and was successful in extending the visa of their missionary.

On October 23, 2006, the Ust-Kamenogorsk city administrative court convicted a foreign citizen of violating the terms of his business visa for giving a lecture at a legally registered Protestant church. The foreign citizen was an administrator at a local university and had attended the church for many years. The court imposed a 41,200 tenge (\$322) fine and ordered his deportation. On November 14, 2006, the appeals court upheld the fine but eliminated the deportation penalty, contingent on the defendant leaving the country voluntarily.

According to media reports, migration officials in the city of Kyzylorda refused to extend the visa of South Korean pastor Kim U Sob after he was convicted in June 2006 of conducting missionary work without registration. Kim was charged after police raided the home of a church member he was visiting outside the city limits of Kyzylorda. Kim's registration was only valid for work within the city limits. Kim was forced to leave the country on November 14, 2006.

Several religious groups, including unregistered Baptists, the Grace Church, Hare Krishnas, and Jehovah's Witnesses, reported that they had been the subject of news accounts portraying nontraditional religious groups as a threat to security or society. Some of the news accounts appeared in government-controlled media.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

As in the previous reporting period, there were no reports of prolonged detention of members of religious organizations for proselytizing. On occasion, authorities took action against individuals engaged in proselytizing who were not registered as missionaries; however, such actions were limited to the confiscation of religious literature, fines, brief detentions, and deportation.

In February 2007, Northern Kazakhstan Oblast authorities conducted a preventative sweep entitled "Operation Religious Extremism" which resulted in the arrest of eight pastors and church leaders for violating religious registration laws. The authorities claimed that the operation was part of a larger CIS-wide program to combat terrorism and violent extremism. In most of the cases, Baptist and evangelical Christian church leaders were prosecuted and fined.

When individuals were found to be guilty of violating Article 374 or 375 of the administrative code, courts imposed a fine. Council of Churches members usually refused to pay fines levied by courts for nonregistration. Church members reported that, unlike previous years, courts began enforcing payment of fines in a few cases, including by seizing property and garnishing wages. In one case during the reporting period, authorities imposed a three-day jail sentence against a pastor in the city of Shymkent.

According to media reports, members of the unregistered Tabligh Jamaat movement, an Islamic missionary group, also faced detentions and fines for conducting religious activities without registration. In September 2006 Aktau authorities fined several Tabligh members for proselytizing in a mosque in the village of Kyzyl-Tobe. In October 2006 police arrested six members of the group in the city of Ekibastuz for delivering a theological lecture at a local mosque, and fined the leader of the group.

As part of its campaign to seize title to land used by the Hare Krishna movement, the Karasai local government outside Almaty forcibly demolished 13 Hare Krishna homes on November 21, 2006, and another 12 homes on June 15, 2007. Several Hare Krishna members were beaten in the November 21 action. For further details and context, see the Restrictions section.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners in the country.

Forced Religious Conversions

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom

In September 2006, President Nazarbayev hosted the second Congress of World and Traditional Religions in Astana, a gathering devoted to strengthening understanding between world cultures, religious groups, and ethnic groups and preventing conflicts based on cultural and religious differences. The event was highly publicized in the country, and included representatives of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Taoism, Shinto, and other international religious organizations.

Nazarbayev regularly made public statements highlighting and praising the country's tradition of interethnic and interfaith tolerance, and remains engaged with international religious leaders and communities. On April 8, 2007, the President gave a nationally televised address during the Easter services of the Orthodox Church in Astana, declaring that "[i]nter-ethnic and inter-faith peace rules in Kazakhstan. We celebrate Islamic Kurban-ait, Christian Easter and the holidays of other religious groups equally, because we never forget the great truth common to all mankind: we have one God and everybody follows his or her own way to God."

According to government statistics, the number of religious groups rose steadily over the last few years. In April 2007 there were 3,855 groups, compared with 3,420 in 2006 and 3,259 in 2005. The Union of Baptists, for example, grew from 254 registered affiliated groups in 2003 to 319 in 2007.

The Government made efforts to promote religious tolerance in its ranks. Human rights training provided to law enforcement officers by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in cooperation with the Government included information on religious rights under the law.

There were no reports of incidents of anti-Semitism committed by the Government. The leadership of the Jewish community consistently praised the Government for its proactive protection of the Jewish community. As in previous reporting periods, leaders of the Jewish community reported no cases of anti-Semitism either by the Government or in society.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The country is multiethnic, with a long tradition of tolerance and secularism. Since independence, the number of mosques and churches has increased greatly. However, the population, particularly in rural areas, is sometimes wary of nontraditional religious groups.

In mid-December 2006, the Megapolis weekly newspaper published interviews with a representative of the SAMK and a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church. Both clergymen favored tightening Kazakhstan's policy against nontraditional religious groups and called for legislative changes to prevent so-called destructive sects and to strengthen the privileged status of the two major religious groups--Islam and Orthodox Christianity. The Russian Orthodox priest stated that nontraditional religious groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Pentecostals, Hare Krishnas, and Scientologists have no historical role in Kazakhstan, and criticized their "destructive work" in the country.

Members of the extremist Hizb ut-Tahrir political movement continued to print and distribute leaflets that supported anti-Semitism, among other beliefs.

Leaders of the four traditional religious groups, Islam, Russian Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Judaism, reported general acceptance and tolerance that was not always enjoyed by other minority religious groups. During the reporting period, there were no reports that mistrust of minority religious groups led to violence.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. officials emphasized that bilateral cooperation on economic and security matters is a complement to, not a substitute for, meaningful progress on human rights, including religious freedom. The Ambassador and Embassy officers remained engaged in dialogue with the Government to seek assurance that proposed legislation concerning religious freedom be drafted through a transparent legislative process, and that it reflect the country's international commitments to respect individuals' rights to peaceful expressions of religion.

The Ambassador and other Embassy officials coordinated with other embassies and international human rights organizations to encourage the Government to seek legal expert assistance from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe/Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) in drafting legislation that had implications for the religious community.

On November 30, 2006, the Embassy released a statement expressing concern over the Karasai district authorities' aggressive campaign against the Hare Krishna commune outside of Almaty, including the demolition of several homes. The statement called for a fair and peaceful resolution of the ongoing legal dispute, and drew significant Government and media attention.

Embassy and U.S. Department of State officials visited houses of worship, met with religious leaders, and worked with government officials to address specific cases of concern.

The Embassy maintained contact with a broad range of religious communities and reported on violations of their Constitutional and human rights. Department of State officials met with government officials and members of faith-based groups in the country. Embassy personnel consistently raised cases of local harassment with government authorities, who generally worked to resolve these cases, and ensure an equitable application of the law. Senior U.S. Government officials met with senior government officials to raise religious freedom concerns. Embassy officials worked to connect religious communities with in-country legal resources to assist with registration concerns.

Embassy officials regularly attended public events in support of the religious community, in addition to participating in roundtables and other public debates on matters of religious freedom and tolerance. U.S. Government representatives in the country and in Washington were in regular contact with NGOs that followed religious freedom topics, including the Almaty Helsinki Committee and the Kazakhstan Bureau of International Human Rights and Rule of Law. On September 11, 2006, the Embassy hosted a well-publicized interfaith appeal for tolerance and observance for victims of terrorism, with leaders from a variety of religious groups.

During the period covered by this report, the Embassy conducted exchange programs for religious leaders and human rights observers. Through the Community Connections Program, several religious leaders and local government officials traveled to the United States in January 2007 to examine religion in a secular society. The participants studied how religious communities in the United States interact with the state and how the state guarantees the rights of religious believers.

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